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AUTHOR Bowen, Raymond C.
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ABSTRACT

In this speech the black president of an urban community college discusses how his experiences as an African American has affected his performance as the leader of his school. He suggests that people from the ghettos tend more naturally to develop genuine understanding of fairness, that African Americans bring a vision of leadership that stresses inclusiveness, and strive for greater cultural and ethnic balance. As a result of these tendencies, La Guardia Community College (New York) has a cooperative education program, and the teaching of basic skills is an integral part of the curriculum. If schools are to succeed in educating minority youngsters who lack both home and community support, educators must fill that void through active involvement and sensitivity in revitalizing the curriculum. A nurturing climate must be established. Presidential leadership is pivotal to the life of any institution of higher learning. Because a person brings to a leadership role the sum total of his unique experiences, being black is inextricably linked to the way an individual operates as president. The richness of a multicultural environment, understanding the importance of economic development, and the necessity of learning basic skills after high school are experiences that benefit a leader of a community college. The critical points and importance of the black experience as race relations changed throughout the 20th century are discussed. The struggle of blacks to gain empowerment played a role in the development of this college administrator as a man and a president. (DK)

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VISION AND THE BLACK COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENT

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VISION AND THE BLACK COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENT

Good morning!

First I would like to offer a piece of advice to any new presidents who might be in the audience. Here it is!

> "Never tell people your troubles -- half of them don't care, and the other half of them are sort of glad it happened to you."

Sometime last year, I gave an interview to Black Issues in Higher Education and the results appeared in the August, 1991 issue. There are hazards for us when we are quoted on issues that evoke a lot of emotions. We might be

guided by this very simple prayer:

> "O Lord, please make my words
> sweet and tender today, for tomorrow
> I may have to eat them."

Tomorrow is here today.

In the article, I stated that "The fact that I am a Black man, has a lot to do with the way I operate as President." That statement amalgamates two thoughts that may appear unrelated: 1) being a Black man and 2) being a college president. As I began to gather my thoughts for this presentation, I had to conceive three factors. First, my daily operations at LaGuardia Community College. Second, my life-long sojourn in these United States and third, the history of African-Americans in this country.

LaGuardia Community College is a relatively large institution located in the borough of Queens in New York City. We enroll approximately 38,000 credit and non-credit students and employ about 1,500 faculty and staff. Although the college is a fairly new institution, we have a positive economic impact on our region. Using a formula provided by the United States Department of Commerce, it is estimated that LaGuardia generates a business volume in Queens and the New York metropolitan area of $420 million, nearly 11 times the size of our annual budget. Not bad for a school only 21 years old!

Like other presidents, most of my time is spent on routine administrative matters. At times, I am called on to serve as spokesperson for the

hundreds of local, national and international visitors who come to the college each year. In explaining to these visitors the reason why the Cooperative Education program is so naturally woven into the curriculum, I note that it has been an integral part of our offerings from the very inception of the College. I also explain why the teaching of basic skills has been so smoothly integrated into the course of study.

This integration was neither an accident nor an afterthought. In fact, the College came into existence at the advent of open admissions in New York. Thus, the acceptance of underprepared students and the willingness of instructors to devise strategies to meet their needs were natural outgrowths in the development of the Institution.

I have cited these two analogies as a way of

developing my own response to leadership from my African-American experience. When I speak of pluralism, I approach it from an empathetic perspective. I submit that people from the ghettos of our country, tend more naturally to develop genuine understanding of fairness. Culturally, African-Americans develop an attitude in relating to others that easily espouses a special empathy for exploited people and a genuine interest in establishing equity.

Although such an attitude seems contrary to the many negative experiences that emerge from interactions with the dominant culture, it is invariably the case that African-Americans bring a vision of leadership that stresses inclusiveness, and more cultural and ethnic balance. The understanding and appreciation of multiculturalism seems to come easily to African-Americans possibly as a testament to

our need to overcome the unfairness of discrimination that has long been directed at us.

I firmly believe that if schools (and this includes our colleges) are to succeed in educating minority youngsters who lack both home and community support, then educators have a responsibility to fill that void. We must do that through active involvement in the revitalization of the curriculum so that it responds to the needs of all students in a very sensitive and inclusive manner. But even before the curriculum can be meaningfully revitalized, the faculty must develop the sensitivity to engage in this process. That is the point where my leadership becomes most critical in mentoring so that a nurturing climate can be established.

Faculty and staff alike look to the President of an institution for cues as they chart their own professional responsibilities within the institution. So, we the leaders of color, have a special obligation to register quite clearly the directions and the agendas we seek to establish. These directions by virtue of our cultural experiences, ought to be different from those of the traditional leaders. It is one thing to employ rhetoric to preach inclusiveness but an entirely different matter to make it come alive through persuasive examples that emerge from our unique experiences.

I submit that such examples come more naturally from those of us whose lives have been honed in ways that clearly demonstrate unusual strength and the will to survive the odds stacked against us. Presidents of color are often watched more closely and even our

casual remarks are critically analyzed and incisively interpreted. Our moods as well as our body language are scrutinized and then become barometers for the state of the college. Consequently, if we are not very careful we might become hypersensitive about things we say or do.

Given this level of responsibility, we realize that communication takes on an all encompassing dimension in our Presidency. One view of academic theorists argues that colleges are "organized anarchies," fluid organizations on which leaders have little impact. Although I have been on many campuses and have seen pockets of both faculty and staff who function in this manner, I do not subscribe to this theory. Rather, I firmly believe that presidential leadership is pivotal to the life of any institution of higher learning.

To this critical leadership we bring the sum total of our unique experiences. That is in essence where I develop the notion that the way I operate as a President is inextricably linked to the fact that I am a Black man. The implications here are numerous and, I suppose, this may arouse the curiosity of many.

When I returned to LaGuardia a few years ago, after a 14 year absence, I was most impressed by the tremendous racial, ethnic and cultural diversity of the college community. This sense of diversity took me back to my early years growing up in Connecticut. During the early 40's in my native city, New Haven, there were African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, ethnic European groups and native Americans. At that time, I did not understand the interconnectedness of these groups in their

quest for educational mobility and economic self-sufficiency.

It was much later in my professional life that I was able to put these early developments into some sort of perspective. Of course, no one articulated multiculturalism then in the sophisticated and pervasive manner that it is being done today. But surely, those early experiences provided me with the foundations of being within a culturally diverse milieu. Graduate studies further enhanced my early experience by bringing me into more meaningful interaction with students from all over the world -- Africa, China, South America, India, Europe and the Carribean. We struggled together and succeeded in spite of our differences. This was yet another valuable lesson in multicultural living.

When I assumed the presidency of LaGuardia Community College with its impressive representation of 70 countries and a language mix that brings 50 languages into our small community, I immediately realized the challenge for a special type of leadership. I declared two major college objectives - (1) the enhancement of Cultural Pluralism and (2) the advancement of economic development. To date, much progress has been made on both of these initiatives and I have every reason to believe that we will continue to make firm strides to fully achieve these objectives.

As an African-American from the ghetto of New Haven, Connecticut, it was quite evident that my high school education did not fully prepare me for the rigors of college. I had to immerse myself in basic skills during my

freshman year in college to survive academically. This experience is quite typical of the majority of African-American youngsters, particularly in our urban centers. My personal experience has sensitized me to the need for a vigorous Basic Skills Program. The argument I make here is that resources allocated today, will invariably pay high dividends tomorrow, in the academic success of our students -- I am a living example.

I began this presentation with a somewhat unorthodox analogy between the growth of two programs at my college and my own natural development as a leader. Permit me to explore in a similarly unorthodox way some historical connections with my own development as a man and a president. I was born 69 years after the passage of the 13th amendment which was intended to end the slavery of Blacks in this

country. Therefore, I know that my grandparents as well as my parents lived in a climate that was every bit tinged with the mentality of legal slavery.

In the last decade of the 19-th century, the Supreme Court of this nation endorsed Plessy vs Ferguson, the principle of "Separate but Equal." This was a principle accepted and supported by the then noted leader, Booker T. Washington, in his famous Atlanta Compromise. Of course, the eminent scholar, W.E.B. Dubois had a radically different stance and consequently spearheaded the formation of the Niagra Movement which later became the NAACP. Thus began one of the earliest organized movements to fight against institutionalized racism.

At the dawn of the present century, W.E.B. Dubois declared with uncanny clairvoyance that the problem of the 20th century is the Race Problem. What did he really mean by this claim? The claim was a prophetically profound prediction as the unfolding events would later reveal.

Yet inspite of harsh laws and the inhospitable environment, many Blacks managed to distinguish themselves. Thus, from the dawn of this century, our history is replete with Blacks who could justifiably qualify as people who have been larger than life. One such individual was Dr. Ralph Bunch, who was the first Black to earn a doctorate at Harvard University in 1934. An educator in his own right, he served as the Chair of the Political Science department at Howard University. He later joined the United Nations staff and in 1950, he became the first

Black to earn the Nobel Peace prize. Incidentally, he earned that prize for the indefatigable effort he exerted, to arrange the armistice between the Arabs and the Israelies in the late forties. This effort represented the essence of African-American leadership.

In 1954, the Supreme Court under Chief Justice Earl Warren struck down the "Separate but Equal" Statues with a ruling in Brown vs Board of Education of Topeka. The legal campaign was, of course, lead by then counsel to the NAACP, Thurgood Marshall who rose eventually to become the first African-American on the Supreme Court. This powerful breakthrough, however, proved more symbolic than actual practice would indicate.

Another watershed event occurred also in the mid fifties when a boycott by Blacks in

Montgomery, Alabama was triggered by the arrest of Rosa Parks for defying the crude segregation laws in the heart of Dixie. The year-long boycott that ensued, spawned a movement that galvanized the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. This led quite naturally to a decade of protests across the country where segregation remained fertile.

Another incendiary in the series of troubling events was the defiant stance taken by then Governor Faubus of Arkansas to thwart the desegration edict handed down by the Supreme Court. Federal troops were sent into Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957 by President Eisenhower to enforce the orders of a federal court. Many of us remember those tense days.

The close of an era witnessed the assassination of one of the most powerful Black leaders this

country had ever known. In 1968 the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. fell to the assassin's bullet on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Cut down in his prime, this Nobel laureate had touched the lives of everyone with his powerful non-violent crusade.

Not without fanfare, another charismatic yet enigmatic leader had emerged in the early 60's. This was none other than Malcolm X who engendered both fear and respect with his firebrand oratory. His persona was depicted as the very antithesis of that of Dr. King. Yet both leaders had come to be recognized for the magnetic power of their speeches. Both men eloquently articulated the plight of Blacks as we struggled to free ourselves from the disabling grip of poverty and racism.

Yet the route each of the two men took to advance his own development as a leader was dramatically different. Dr. King used the formal traditional education route; Malcolm X on the other hand, took a route that led through deviant behavior, prison and disciplined self-education. Malcolm also fell victim to an assassin's bullet in 1965 at the time in his life when his philosophy was still evolving.

I have touched selectively on these vignettes of history to illustrate in part, the epic struggle of Blacks to gain empowerment. These events reflect some of the critical pieces that played a role in my development both as a man and a president. It was certainly not my intention to fully analyze these occurrences. Nor did I attempt to exhaust the virtual kaleidoscope of major events that most certainly helped to

shape my thinking and behavior.

For example, I did not mention World War I, the Depression of the 30's, World War II in the 40's, the Korean War in the 50's or the Vietnam War in the 60's. These are, of course, major events that played significant roles in the lives of all African-Americans as we migrated in large numbers to the urban centers. Suffice it to say, however, that I have touched on enough here to spark endless discussion, heated debate and possibly vibrant controversy. I believe that my growth and development was in large measure influenced by the confluence of these dynamic issues and experiences.

Because I cannot separate the scholarship of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois from the education of the Black man.....

Because I cannot separate the oratory of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X from the experience of the Black man.....

Because I cannot separate the wisdom and determination of a Thurgood Marshall, of a Ralph Bunch or of my father, Ray Bowen, Sr., from the soul of the Black man.....

Then, I cannot separate Ray Bowen the President from Ray Bowen the Black man!!

Thank you!

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